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December 2011

I have used several different approaches to building consensus on public issues, and in this situation I recommend a formal process known as ARIA C-3¹ developed by internationally renowned mediator Dr. Jay Rothman,. **ARIA** stands for **A**spiration, **R**esonance, **I**vention and **A**ction. C-3 signifies that the process allows participants to “see” the issue from three distinct perspectives: as an individual, as a member of a group, and as a member of the whole community. There are numerous advantages of the ARIA C-3 process:

First, ARIA C-3 is a proven, theory-based process. It has been used over 200 times in situations ranging from strategic planning in a for-profit corporation, to multi-stakeholder planning process for the future of the Fleet Fishery in New England, to a conflict between police and community that had erupted into a full-scale riot. Professional evaluators have consistently given the process high marks for transparency, inclusivity and effectiveness.

Second, ARIA C-3 allows very large numbers of people to provide input, including those who are unable to attend meetings in person. It does this by allowing anyone in a community to say *what* they want for the future, *why* the goals are important to them, and *how* the goals might be achieved. People provide their input through a web-based interface or pen and paper, and all of the ideas go into a database that is used continually as the process unfolds.

Third, the process uses “intra-group feedback sessions” as a first step. This means people first meet together with others who agree with them and reach consensus on goals *within their group* before meeting with representatives of those who share other opinions. This sounds risky, but experience shows that people often feel “my” side is poorly organized while “their” side is powerful and well prepared. Allowing *intra*-group agenda building prior to *inter*-group negotiations levels the playing field in a transparent way.

Fourth, the *inter*-group negotiation sessions are carefully structured to create a safe space for people to have an honest dialogue and express their deepest concerns without personal attacks or other destructive interactions.

Fifth, each *inter*-group negotiation session leads to a decision that is made by consensus. The consensus rule addresses the common fear that “their” side will have more people and outvote “our” side. Experience suggests that giving every participant a “one person veto” encourages cooperation rather than stalemate.

Last, the goal of the process is *action*, not just talk. The underlying theory is quite complex. At the risk of oversimplification, it can be summarized as follows: Assuring every person that they will have their turn to be heard about their **Aspirations** and *why they care so much* has the paradoxical effect of allowing them to listen to the others. Listening allows them to hear the music beneath the words and to discover **Resonance**, the deeper values that they share with the “others.” **Invention** can then proceed because building on the common ground of shared values can happen without asking people to sacrifice positions or compromise their beliefs. Of crucial importance, the last word is **Action**. People are tired of dialogue that never goes anywhere.

¹ www.ariagroup.com/?page_id=7